

Keynote address at gala hosted by the Cuban Patriotic Council and Cuban Municipalities in Exile, by the Chief of Mission of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, James C. Cason.
January 28, 2005

“Will History Absolve Castro?”

Today we celebrate the birthday of Jose Marti, the hero who Fidel Castro says inspired his 1953 attack on the Moncada barracks. That assault made a name for the young Castro, converting him into one of the leaders of the opposition movement that eventually overthrew Batista.

During Castro's trial following the attack, he delivered an impassioned final summation. The defiant Castro concluded that he would be convicted, but asserted famously “History Will Absolve Me.” Castro's peroration condemned the corrupt Batista regime and laid out his vision of a liberated Cuba. At the time, Castro was very convincing on both counts: he skillfully juxtaposed the ugliness of the Batista dictatorship against the Cuban people's thwarted democratic aspirations.

Castro's speech is a good framework to analyze where Cuba is today. Let's review whether History will indeed absolve him.

Castro appears to have taken the title of his summation, “History Will Absolve Me,” from Adolph Hitler's own courtroom speech. Biographies of Castro's secondary school years recount his fascination with fascism and his fervent hope that the Axis powers would win World War II. We should not hold an adolescent's fascination with fascism against that person sixty years later, except in Castro's case he never appears to have grown out of it.

Let's begin with the circumstances Castro found himself in when he prepared his speech. According to his own words, Castro was “confined in a solitary cell, incommunicado, [and] had not been able to look at his indictment before [he was] brought before court. [He was] practically deprived of legal aid.”

Sound familiar?

In March and April 2003, Castro unleashed another of his many cycles of repression by imprisoning 75 pro-democracy activists. He sentenced these non-violent champions of free speech and democracy to a total of 1,454 years! Yet none of them had led an armed insurrection that had cost men's lives. The seventy-five were only guilty of wielding pens on behalf of democratic principles.

In 1953, Castro complained that “a lawyer is supposed to have the right to speak with his client in private, and this right is respected worldwide, save in the case of a Cuban prisoner of war in the hands of an implacable tyranny that abides by no legal or humane rules.” Such a lack of due process merited condemnation, then as now. So thank you, Mr. Castro, I couldn't have said it any better myself about how you have treated the 75.

In his courtroom defense, Castro denounced the “lies,” the “hypocrisy,” and the “crude comedy” of Batista's justice. He claimed that Batista was afraid to bring him to court. Castro grandiloquently stated: “What horrendous crimes this regime must have committed to so fear the voice of a defendant!” Yes, indeed, Mr. Castro. Your denunciations, made in 1953, perfectly describe the regime you yourself created. Today, under your rule, justice in Cuba means being jailed for advocating a peaceful change in government. Your trials of the 75 peaceful pro-democracy activists also barred the public from attending. Each of us here today can remember many other examples of when Castro denied such fundamental rights to others.

There is an interesting contrast between the appalling, inhuman prison conditions that Castro

subjects his political prisoners to with what he experienced after his conviction. In his letters from prison at the Isle of Pines, Castro bragged about his own comfortable conditions: clean clothes, twice daily baths, a spotless cell, daily sun and fresh air, unrestricted reading material and excellent food. The vindictive Castro has never felt any need to extend similar consideration to those he incarcerates.

Castro justified his armed attack on Moncada as an act to free Cuba from a dictatorship: "We have promoted a rebellion against a single, illegal power, that has usurped and merged the nation's legislative and executive powers..."

To justify the overthrow of tyrannical regimes, Castro approvingly cited the renowned political thinker Montesquieu's description of despotic governments, "where a single ruler, without regard for laws or rules, acts as he pleases, according to his will and whim, where fear is the essence of a despotic regime." Castro had latched onto a perfect description of the dictator that he would become.

Today, Castro himself wields absolute power over Cuba. The National Assembly meets twice a year to hear reports from government officials and to rubber stamp Castro's dictates. Not once in its history has the National Assembly voted "no." And the corrupted judiciary determines political cases with lightning speed, once it has received instructions from the country's supreme leader.

In 1953, for whom did Castro claim to speak? Castro maintained he was not addressing the well off, but rather "the vast unredeemed masses... that yearn for a better, more dignified and more just fatherland." We know that was a lie. Today, the courageous men and women who lead the democratic opposition in Cuba represent the deceived and betrayed masses Castro pretended to champion in 1953. The great majority of Cuba's dissidents today come from humble backgrounds. They have found the courage to demand their most basic civil rights. They know that all Cubans still yearn for a better, more dignified and more just nation – and that the best way to achieve this long thwarted aspiration is a democratic Cuba.

In 1953, Castro reminded his court room audience of the "six hundred thousand unemployed Cubans who want to earn their daily bread honestly without having to emigrate from their homeland," of the "one hundred thousand small farm laborers ... who, like feudal serfs, have to pay for the use of a plot of land by giving up a portion of its produce," of the "thirty thousand teachers and professors...who are so badly treated and paid," of the "ten thousand young professionals who graduate anxious to work and full of hope, only to find themselves at a dead-end street." Castro continued: "industrialization, housing... education and public health are the problems we would take steps to resolve immediately, along with restoration of civil liberties and political democracy."

All of us here know what really happened. If there is one defining characteristic of Castro's Cuba, it is the desperation of Cubans wanting to flee his suffocating rule and the resulting lack of economic opportunities. After Castro's revolution over 1.2 million Cubans -- or twelve percent of the population -- have left the island; in U.S. population terms, that would be the equivalent to 34 million Americans fleeing this country.

But let's give the devil his due. Castro's regime has spent a lot of money on education and public health, which it touts as the crowning achievements of the Revolution. To be more precise, the regime spent a lot of Soviet money on education and health, having received between 65 billion dollars in Soviet subsidies over three decades.

Pause to mull over the enormous amount of money that the Soviets poured into Cuba. They gave Castro the equivalent of up to five Marshall Plans; remember, it only took one Marshall Plan to rebuild Western Europe. Castro, on the other hand, still managed to run the Cuban economy into the ground.

As memories of the Soviet largesse fade, many of the gains previously achieved in the public health and educational sectors have been lost. In 1953, Castro said high school teachers should make at least 350 pesos per month, but fifty years later, most teachers earn 250 pesos, about ten dollars. Little wonder that experienced teachers are leaving the profession in droves, many of them desperately trying to enter into the tourist sector to earn hard currency. All hospitals, except those reserved for regime elites, have deteriorated badly. The regime exports its surplus doctors to developing nations for hard currency and political advantage. Yet average Cubans experience difficulties in affording basic medicine, like aspirin.

Yes, educational and health conditions did improve in some previously ignored areas of Cuba -- as they have just about everywhere in the world without the imposition of tyranny. Improving these sectors, as we all know, does not require the elimination of civil liberties, the punishment of pro-democracy dissenters, and the bankrupting of a once-prosperous nation.

What about Castro's other promises?

Castro pledged that he would promote land reform by giving "non-transferable ownership to all the tenants, subtenants, lessees, sharecroppers and squatters" that held less than 165 acres, and to compensate the former owners. Instead, Castro collectivized most agricultural holdings, destroying incentives for production. Today, beef, milk and even most vegetables are expensive luxuries for the Cuban majority, while predictions are that sugar will experience its worst harvest in over ninety years.

Castro's pledge in 1953 to provide 30 percent profit sharing to the workers of all the "big industrial, mercantile and mining enterprises, including the sugar mills," has been proven to be a pitiful joke. His dream of industrializing Cuba was a mirage that evaporated after the disappearance of the Soviet subsidies. Cuba is now left with factories that are inefficient, costly and unsustainable.

In 1953, Castro decried the housing crisis in Cuba, noting there were: "400,000 families in the countryside and cities [which] live in cramped barracks; tenements lack even the minimum sanitary requirements."

Today, even the most unobservant visitor to the island can see that Cubans suffer from a profound shortage of adequate housing -- an estimated deficit of 1.6 million housing units. Overcrowding and decayed buildings are the national norm. One study finds that 39 percent of the housing units do not meet habitability standards. A UN report estimates that nearly two partial collapses occur in Old Havana every three days.

In 1953, Castro asserted that Cuba's "markets should overflow with products, cupboards should be full, everyone should be working." Perhaps to only his own surprise, Castro hasn't been able to make this happen by decree. Government stores that sell in pesos offer a meager selection of goods. And those that sell in convertible pesos are prohibitively expensive for the majority of Cubans.

Castro also claimed in 1953 that under a revolutionary government, "Cuban policy for the Americas would be one of close solidarity with the democratic peoples of the continent" and that "Cuba would be a bulwark of freedom and not a shameful link of despotism." Once in power, he has avidly encouraged efforts to undermine long-established democracies in Latin America and elsewhere. As for international solidarity, Castro has allied himself with some of the most repugnant repressive countries in the world.

Castro was right when he said it "was a most important mission" to disclose to the world the misfortune of the Cuban people. Indeed, Castro was right on so many of the points of his 1953 court self-defense. The great tragedy is that he did not heed his own words.

Castro has the demagogue's disregard for language, justice and truth. In Orwellian fashion he calls war "Peace" and hate "Love." His "Truth" is now the only one that exists on the island. His misnamed "Battle of Ideas" is a one-way flow of venom and disinformation, not a contest between opposing schools of thought.

A small group of valiant pro-democracy Cubans today resist Castro's tyranny publicly. Tens of thousands more resist passively, refusing to believe the state media's lies, and spurning the regime's calls to teach their children revolutionary values, to participate in political rallies, or to spy on their neighbors. We must continue supporting these patriots.

Most Cubans today would like a 21st-century version of what Castro described as pre-1952 Cuba: "a Republic...with its Constitution, its law, its freedoms, its President, its Congress and its Courts of Law. Everyone could assemble, associate, speak and write with complete freedom. The people were not satisfied with the government, but they had the power to elect a new one.... Public opinion was respected and obeyed, and all shared problems were freely discussed. There were political parties, radio and television debates, public meetings..."

That will be, I am certain, once again Cuba's reality.

Castro has never understood that freedom brings prosperity. Letting free citizens decide what they want to study, where they want to live, how to earn their living, and who to represent them politically -- that is what makes a dynamic economy and a healthy society. Allowing individuals to profit from their own hard work and ingenuity, allowing companies to produce goods people want and to sell them at a profit -- that is the way of meeting the people's needs and creating prosperity.

I'm equally certain that when they have the choice, the Cuban people will take the path of individual freedom.

History will be Castro's final judge, but I for one do not believe that he will be absolved.